**Employee Engagement Lessons From Southwest Airlines**

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It’s hard to discuss employee engagement without mentioning Southwest Airlines. Here’s how Southwest’s founder and former CEO [Herb Kelleher once described his approach to management](http://experiencematters.wordpress.com/2011/09/28/cx-mistake-6-ignoring-employees/):

*“If you create an environment where the people truly participate, you don’t need control. They know what needs to be done and they do it. And the more that people will devote themselves to your cause on a voluntary basis, a willing basis, the fewer hierarchies and control mechanisms you need.”*

That’s not just an empty observation; it defines how Southwest Airlines has been built. I recently heard a presentation from Southwest and wanted to share some of the more interesting tidbits.

* **80% of Southwest’s employees are unionized, the largest of any airline.***My take*: That’s interesting, and provides a clear example that companies can engage unionized employees. It really hit home to me when I saw this [great note from the pilot’s union to Kelleher](http://experiencematters.wordpress.com/2008/05/22/the-tale-of-two-airlines-southwest-and-american/) when he retired.
* **Each workgroup at Southwest is the highest paid in the industry**.  
  *My take*: The company can afford to do this because it takes advantage of what we call the Employee Engagement Virtuous Cycle. It turns out that [companies with above average financial results tend to also have more engaged employees](http://experiencematters.wordpress.com/2013/01/29/report-employee-engagement-benchmark-study-2013/).
* **After 9/11, Southwest was the only airline not to lay off people**.  
  *My take*: It actually sold off some planes instead. It’s easy to focus on employee engagement when things are going well, but the real demonstration of commitment comes when people are forced to make difficult trade-offs.
* **To help keep the airline viable when gas prices spiked in 1991,** [**employees voluntarily purchased fuel**](http://articles.latimes.com/1991-01-08/business/fi-7829_1_southwest-airlines) **for the company via payroll deductions**.  
  *My take*: Employees that are treated as important participants in the business will go out of their way to help the company. Our analysis shows that [employees who are inspired by their company’s mission](http://experiencematters.wordpress.com/2013/01/11/is-your-mission-inspiring-employees/) are more likely to go out of their way to help.
* **In May 1972, the company created the 10-minute plane turnaround**.  
  *My take*: This innovation was the response to a desperate situation where the company wanted to keep servicing the same number of routes although it had to cut back on the number of its planes. This critical innovation could never have been done by mandate, it took the full participation and involvement of Southwest’s employees.
* **The company describes itself as having a servant’s head, a warrior’s spirit, and a fun LUVing attitude**.  
  *My take:* I really like this description. The head is about living the golden rule, the spirit is about doing whatever it takes, and the attitude is a play off of the company’s pervasive use of the term LUV, which is its stock ticker symbol as well. Southwest employees take their work seriously, but not themselves.
* **If it can be done, I’ll do it**.  
  *My take:* That’s the positive attitude that Southwest employees are taught to have with customers. It’s a stark contrast to the “can’t do” attitude that shows up with employees at many other companies. That’s why Southwest is the easiest airline to do business with in the [2012 Temkin Experience Ratings](http://experiencematters.wordpress.com/2012/02/24/southwest-provides-best-airline-customer-experience/). Interestingly, number two on the list is AirTran, the airline acquired by Southwest.
* **We make deposits in the goodwill bank**.  
  *My take:* That’s another phrase I LUV. Everyone makes mistakes, but companies that build goodwill are often given a second (and third, fourth, fifth, etc.) chance. Southwest can count on a relatively high degree of goodwill, given it was right behind JetBlue in the [2012 Temkin Forgiveness Ratings](http://experiencematters.wordpress.com/2012/04/17/2012-temkin-forgiveness-ratings/).